

Behold the Lamb 4: Refining Fathers

God always honors His Word and sacraments even if His servants act dishonorably. For example, I once had a pastor whose stellar preaching (some of his word-pictures still shed light for me on complex truths) coexisted with a trail of confusing seductions he initiated with women in our congregation. God's Word prevailed (through our efforts and a long wait)--he was finally disciplined--but until then the congregation breathed toxic air. God sustains the faithful but sheep still suffer from sleazy shepherds. How much better for fathers of the faith to prepare for leadership through the splendid, humbling task of becoming chaste?

Here's the rub. Due to the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, in which entire dioceses have been brought to their knees by multi-million dollar settlements for victims, the Church is now super wary of any sexual vulnerability in her priests and religious. In the sexual arena, avoiding litigation seems the Church's greatest goal; she fumbles at forthright, compassionate dealing with her fathers and mothers who actually need help in order to become chaste. 'Just be chaste, don't be known', she conveys today.

To misquote Simone DeBeauvoir: 'We are not born chaste, we become it.' How else do we grow into integrated men and women unless we come into the Light with our misdemeanors before they become felonies? How many priests and diocesan workers do I know who fall regularly into masturbation/porn cycles, habits born of disintegration that keep them disintegrated, hobbled by shame and wounded in their self-gift? Having sinned weakly, does each one have a responsibility to come boldly to the throne of grace? Of course!

But that requires context for church leaders, especially those who always handle the confessions of others. Does the Church provide clear, merciful, powerful, and effective relationships through which these ones can break fear and silence and quicken the journey toward self-mastery and gender integration? Today's Church, though clear on the requirement of priestly chastity, fails to invite most priests into the messy process of becoming chaste. In part due to the litigious mess she is in. I can almost guarantee you that the majority of priests will not take a seminary course on sexual integration this year.

That is at least short-sighted. Failing to provide wise preventative measures for her weak servants sets the Church up for further scandals and reveals an unloving, unreal expectation toward them. Everyone, especially her saints, is sexually broken! Lust in its myriad forms touches all of us. So must we as the Church provide real life opportunities for leaders-in-formation to be rightly formed in the sexual arena, without fear of being buried for being broken. Better to breakdown in the arms of the saints than to break another through lust.

My wife Annette is right. She claims that 'the best preparation for ministry lies in discipleship: persons gathering long enough with safe, powerful saints in order to know themselves honestly in their sexual and relational depths, and to be known by Jesus through these members of Christ.'

At first I thought she was overstating her case. She was not. We as the Church must guarantee that our 'Fathers' do not go-it-alone. We have seen what happens when they do. Fathers and Fathers-to-be especially need refining love. Bring it on God.

'Make Your Church wise and tender and strong toward her servants. Help her to love them like a good mother and father, only better. Reveal Your almighty tenderness to prodigal elder sons and daughters, O God; give them a fighting chance to come clean and become whole. You can only love us if we expose ourselves to love. Make Your Church a place of where we can come broken, boldly.'